

# BOOK WORLD

JULY 18, 1971

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McNAMARA: His Ordeal in the Pentagon. By Henry L. Trehwitt. Harper & Row. 307 pp. \$7.95

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By Ronald Steel

The most telling comment about Robert McNamara is to be found not in Henry Trehwitt's informative, workmanlike account of "his ordeal in the Pentagon," but in the no-longer-secret Vietnam papers. There we learn that while Lyndon Johnson was denouncing the wider war he was preparing to fight, and while Taylor, Rostow, McNaughton, and the two Bundys were drawing up plans for the devastation of North Vietnam and the dispatch of an American army, the former secretary of defense was less interested in the debate over the clandestine build-up than in making sure the supply trains would run on time. "From the records," the Pentagon report states, "the Secretary comes out much more clearly for good management than he does for any particular strategy."

This confirms what we long suspected about the man who in his seven years in office doubled the military budget to \$80 billion; streamlined the war machine, multiplied the missile force, and obsessively persisted in the TFX fiasco; and whose proudest accomplishment was to increase our ability to fight non-nuclear wars—an achievement that made Vietnam possible. Applying his managerial experience at Ford to the military and political labyrinths of the Pentagon, McNamara was a ruthless, often brilliant, administrator. But his political judgment was narrow, his preoccupation with efficiency all-consuming, and his humane instincts at war with his loyalty to authority and his faith in technology. A superb technician, he carried out orders, never questioned the wider purposes of the war he engineered with such chilling efficiency, and meekly shuffled off stage when he was no longer wanted.

The McNamara story is not tragic, for that implies a higher form of self-recognition absent from this tale. Nor is it even pathetic. Rather it is a now almost-classic account of intelligence in the service of power, and organizational efficiency as an end in itself. To reflect on the career of Robert McNamara is to understand how German intellectuals such as Albert Speer could have served the Nazi war machine. The kind of mind that asks *how* rather than *why* will always be honored so long as it performs the functions assigned to it. The fact that McNamara was able to rationalize his role as engi-

neer of the Vietnam war until late 1967, when fatigue and disillusion made the effort almost insupportable, is what gives his case a special meaning.

A good part of this comes through in Trehwitt's *McNamara*, a useful account of a man whose most interesting feature was his capacity for self-deception. Diplomatic correspondent of *Newsweek*, and editor of

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a collection of McNamara's speeches published in 1968 under the title *The Essence of Security*, Trehwitt manages to be objective despite his evident sympathy for his subject. Although he skillfully recounts McNamara's rise to the presidency of the Ford Motor Company and czar of the world's most powerful military machine, neither the sympathy nor his proximity to the subject is sufficient to bring to life an inscrutable figure who on the same day could quote T. S. Eliot and choose bombing targets in Vietnam. In the end we are left to interpret as we wish the conflict between the supremely rational technocrat and the humanist who quoted philosophers and poets... a creature of towering accomplishment and substantial failure."

The accomplishments are real, though some are temporal, and others of dubious desirability. He asserted the authority of his computer-wielding civilians over the military; resisted numerous pork-barrel projects foisted on him by military contractors, gadget-happy generals, and brass-minded congressmen; helped push through the Senate the nuclear test-ban treaty of 1963; and transformed a military force based on deterrence

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through nuclear weapons into a powerful instrument of aggressive diplomacy capable of intervening anywhere in the world at any chosen level of violence.

Within a month after assuming office he wrote off, to Kennedy's embarrassment, the so-called "missile gap" as a figment of Democratic politicians' imagination; undertook a complete review of U.S. strategy, and evolved a policy of "flexible response" ranging from nuclear devastation to counter-guerrilla warfare. Adopting Maxwell Taylor's argument for more powerful non-nuclear forces, he wanted an army capable of fighting limited wars without triggering an atomic holocaust. Like Kennedy, he believed guerrilla wars were the wave of the future, and held in contempt attitudes such as those expressed by Charles Wilson, one of his predecessors under Eisenhower, who believed, "We can't afford to fight limited wars. We can only afford to fight a big war, and if there is one, that is the kind it will be."

McNamara's job was to make sure that we could fight any kind of war. Once the capacity was there, once he had swollen the military budget and pushed his programs through a Congress intimidated by manipulated crises such as those in Berlin and Cuba, the war was found—in Vietnam. The liberal intellectuals Kennedy brought with him to Washington staked out the terrain, and McNamara provided the precision war machine which allowed them to test their theories of "compellence," "counter-insurgency," and "nation-building." Eventually the euphoria wore off, the failure of Vietnam became increasingly obvious, and many began to question the need for such multi-billion-dollar gadgets as the scandal-ridden C-5A transport plane and the ocean-going FDL troop carriers. Even such a conservative as Richard Russell, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, began complaining that "if it is easy for us to go anywhere and do anything, we will always be going somewhere and doing something."

But that was near the end, when McNamara's theories of "flexible response" seemed a formula for unending war rather than a device to avoid the choice between embarrassment or atomic holocaust. In the beginning, however, when the Kennedy intellectuals were swarming over Washington with projects to "get the country moving again," the new strategy being evolved in the Pentagon seemed full of promise. It offered a way of countering the communists on various levels short of nuclear war. It was nearer the truth to say, however, as Trehitt observes, that "the Administration was inclined to equate the capability for flexible response with a mandate for action."

McNamara played a peripheral part in the major foreign policy crises, such as the Bay of Pigs, which he initially supported, and the Cuban missile episode, about which his most perceptive comment was that it made little difference whether one was killed by short-range missiles from Cuba or long-range ones from Russia. But he was overruled by those who saw the Soviet missiles as a test of American resolve, as well as those who considered them a

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(Continued from page 1) danger to the Democrats in the upcoming congressional elections.

On Vietnam the record clearly shows that McNamara was an interventionist who shared the assumptions of an administration committed to the survival of a non-communist regime in Saigon, and willing to preserve it at almost any cost. "Like Kennedy," Trehwhitt comments,

McNamara regarded the survival of a non-communist government in South Vietnam to be important not only for its own sake, but also for its possible influence on the probing by the Soviet Union of the United States position elsewhere.

As U.S. involvement in the war deepened, so did McNamara's role as its chief engineer until the point where he became, in Trehwhitt's words, "the principal architect of the American intervention."

While Trehwhitt presumably did not have the benefit of the Pentagon papers to document McNamara's activities, we have, thanks to a courageous press, learned that:

1) On McNamara's recommendation Johnson approved on February 1, 1964, under the code name Operation Plan 34A, an elaborate program of covert military operations against North Vietnam, including sabotage, commando raids, kidnappings, U-2 spy flights, and bombardment of North Vietnamese coastal installations. These operations were supplemented by destroyer patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin and an air war in Laos. They were designed, in the words of the report, "to result in substantial destruction, economic loss and harassment," culminating in three phases through 1964 in the bombing of "targets identified with North Vietnam's economic and industrial well-being." The report notes that "the clandestine operations were directed for the President by Mr. McNamara."

2) In a memo to the president of March 16, 1964, McNamara proposed two new programs for "new and significant pressures upon North Vietnam"; (a) ground and retaliatory air assaults by South Vietnamese forces

loyal. "I think the actions that this government has followed, the objectives it has had in Vietnam, are wise," he stated in his farewell appearance.

McNamara was a team player, sending off memos LBJ was no longer interested in, warning against escalation while still remaining committed to the military and political objectives that brought the U.S. to Vietnam, faithful to the president whose judgment he had begun to doubt but whom he would never dare publicly question. Rather than resigning in protest, and thereby helping to turn public opinion against the war, he hung around until he was kicked out. Loyal to his boss as any *apparatchik*, he was, in Trehwhitt's words, "capable of reasoned and articulate defense, with conscience undisturbed, of decisions he opposed once they had been made."

He was no doubt as glad to be rid of Vietnam as Johnson was glad to be rid of him. But it had been his war, and when Wayne Morse labeled it such, he shot

to be launched within 72 hours notice; (b) air attacks against military and industrial targets to be carried out within thirty days notice. In the memo McNamara further warned against "premature" negotiations and noted, in the analyst's words, that "any attempt to negotiate a compromise political settlement of the war between the Vietnamese themselves was to be avoided because it would result in a communist takeover and the destruction of the American position in South Vietnam." McNamara also mentioned the dangerous growth of "neutralist sentiment" in Saigon and the possibility of a coup by neutralist forces which might form a coalition government with the communists and ask the U.S. to leave. In May 1964 William Bundy sent the president a thirty-day scenario for graduated military pressure against the North culminating in full-scale bombing attacks. McNamara did not rule out bombing, but stressed that it must be "supplementary to and not a substitute for" success against the Vietcong in the South.

Deceit and certainty gradually gave way to disillusion and doubt. After the Tet offensive McNamara began to believe that the political aspect of the war had been mishandled and, according to the Pentagon papers, in May, 1967, even favored a coalition government in Saigon. His original enthusiasm for the bombing soon faded, and by October 1966 he tried to level it off, calling for the construction of a billion-dollar electronic barrier between the two Vietnams to halt infiltration. The Joint Chiefs of Staff saw this as the anti-bombing ruse it was, and instead insisted on increasing the raids. A skeptical, half-hearted defense secretary was no longer useful to Lyndon Johnson, who, in true imperial style, informed the World Bank that McNamara would be its new president. In February 1968 the man who had burst upon Washington seven years earlier with such dazzling *éclat* departed from the scene, grasping the Medal of Freedom that Lyndon Johnson had awarded him in lieu of a gold watch. To the end he remained

back,

I must say I don't object to its being called McNamara's War. I think it is a very important war and I am pleased to be identified with it and do whatever I can to win it.

No matter how much he grew to hate the war, as Trehwhitt points out, "he had engineered the bombing, however restricted; he had poured in the troops, and he remained the trusted adviser of a president committed, semantics aside, to military victory in South Vietnam."

McNamara was not an evil man, but he was arrogant and self-deluding. Like many other intellectuals brought in by Kennedy and retained by Johnson, he believed in the virtue of American power and the ability, indeed the right, of the United States to shape the world. In the end the struggle between his loyalty and his conscience defeated him. By serving the State too well, this faithful technocrat diminished himself and helped bring dishonor on the Nation. ✽